Philosophical Paper

The Role of the Youth Development Educator in Communities

By

Susan M. Pleskac
Associate Professor
Department of Youth Development
University of Wisconsin-Extension
Jefferson County

March 2000

Published by Department of Youth Development
Philosophical Paper

The Role of the Youth Development Educator in Communities

Susan M. Pleskac
Associate Professor
Department of Youth Development
University of Wisconsin-Extension
Jefferson County

Abstract

University Extension youth development educators are strategically placed in communities to serve as the hub of the local youth development wheel. Local educational efforts need to focus on six spokes of emphasis to keep the wheel moving forward. This provides a holistic approach to positive youth development in each community.
Introduction and Situation

The role of the University Extension youth development educator in communities has changed as local educational programmatic needs diversify. No longer can there be a singular approach of direct service. Communities have evolved, increasing in sophistication. Community members, businesses, service providers, families and youth access information directly through improved mass communications and technological advances. Resources to meet local needs are limited and highly competitive. As communities move toward sustainability, revitalization and positive youth development frameworks are essential interdependent components. Therefore, the youth development educator must respond to these multiple needs with a holistic approach.

Youth development does not happen in isolation. It happens within the context of families, neighborhoods and communities. (Pittman, 1998). Positive youth development takes the step forward by insuring youth are not only risk-free but also fully prepared. (Pittman, 1998). It provides youth the skills and experiences that result in competent, caring and capable citizens and adults. Focusing local educational efforts of youth development programming to maximize the opportunities and supports present within families, neighborhoods and communities strengthens the impact of all initiatives. (Zeldin, 1995).

Using the image of a wheel, the role of the Youth Development Educator in communities may best be represented as the hub. As a center hub, the educator is connected to a variety of players and needs within a community that become the spokes of
the wheel. When the number of spokes are balanced, the wheel of positive youth
development goes forward. In order to maximize youth development education, the
opportunities, supports and essential elements that are in place for youth can measure

The local educational efforts can be directed in at least six categories on spokes of
the wheel. These include:

1. Providing policy makers with current objective, non-partisan, research-based
   information on positive youth development issues which will assist them in designing
   and implementing policies that build opportunities and supports for youth.

2. Creating and strengthening local community partnerships that impact youth and youth
   issues.

3. Connecting youth serving agencies and youth workers to provide a forum for shared
   resources and organizational strengths.

4. Strengthening the youth development principles in practice with local 4-H community
   clubs.

5. Developing partnerships between community members and academic researchers to
   build the base of applicable youth development research.

6. Modeling positive youth development principles through each educational endeavor to
   create a visible example for the community.

With the skilled youth development educator as the hub, the wheel is held together
enabling knowledge to flow into and out of the spokes allowing the wheel to roll forward.

**Implications For Educational Efforts:**
1. Providing policy makers with current objective, non-partisan, research-based information on positive youth development issues which will assist them in designing and implementing policies that build opportunities and support for youth.

According to Bogenschneider (1999), the connection between research in areas of social sciences and policymaking has few examples over the last fifty years. Bogenschneider states:

“This under utilization, which has defied explanation for half a century is particularly compelling now given the convergence of three forces: policymaker’s requests for high quality research to guide their decisions (Miller, 1996; Strickland, 1996), a supply of increasingly sophisticated research, and social scientists’ growing interest in applying research outside the walls of academia (Zigler, 1998).” (p. 1).

As part of the seven guiding characteristics offered to land grant universities to define an engaged institution, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities highlights academic neutrality, providing further support for the need of connecting policy makers with current social science research. The report specifically states the importance of “the role of neutral facilitator and source of information when public policy issues… are at stake” (Returning to Our Roots; The Engaged Institution, 1999, p. 12).

At the state and local level, policymakers maintain their attendance at Family Impact Seminars, one educational method used to inform public policymakers. Family Impact Seminars provide current research based educational presentations by prominent
researchers and practitioners in the field of children, youth and families to policy makers and community leaders. Policy makers find the information presented as relevant and useful to their needs, rating these 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale, with 5 representing excellent. Evaluation data was cumulative from seminars presented from 1993 to 1999. (Crave, 1997). As local and state policymakers maintain connections with local coalitions and partnerships, requests for additional research from local faculty continues to increase. Policymakers want to have the most current non-partisan information as they make decisions that affect youth and families.

Educational response to these needs can be met through multiple techniques. These include:

- Conducting educational forums similar to the Family Impact Seminar model.
- Providing a connection for policymakers to local partnerships focusing on youth and family objectives. This can be achieved through invitations to the partnership table, providing minutes from partnership meetings, and maintaining open channels of communication with policymakers.
- Providing research-based information and resources in a timely manner when requested. This includes local, state, or national research and information.
- Developing credibility as a reliable and unbiased resource for youth development research.
2. **Creating and strengthening local community partnerships that impact youth and youth issues.**

“It takes a whole village to raise a child,” according to the saying that is often attributed to African origins. All sectors of communities are coming to the table to address their health and well being, finding the need to focus on youth and family issues as fundamental. Youth development models in the past have focused primarily on deficits and removal of negative behaviors. Coming from the public health field, the prevention models have merit but often fall short. (Pittman, 1998). Pittman often refers to preventing youth problems as ‘the glass half empty.’ She adds, however, problem free is not fully prepared. Pittman advocates those developing positive youth outcomes as ‘the glass half full.’ (Pittman, 1998). Communities are discovering that linking these two concepts together can provide strategies that work for positive youth and family development. Benson (1998) calls this comprehensive, collaboration and citizen engagement.

Paramount is the importance of youth to be viewed as resources and partners at the table, engaged in developing solutions and building communities. The National Network for Youth has proposed a Community Youth Development Framework to guide the work of community youth development. (National Network for Youth, 12/15/99). They define community youth development (CYD) as intentional social change. “It is a process of youth and adults working in partnership to create just, safe and healthy communities.” Youth need to be recognized as resources for themselves and for communities as they solve youth issues and build on youth strengths.

Partners at the table of local coalitions ideally reflect the local community. These include leaders and members from the following areas: law enforcement, judicial branch,
health, schools, human services, community and service clubs and programs, businesses, policymakers, youth serving agencies, citizens and youth. Local educational response includes:

- Training in positive youth development, adolescent development, youth development frameworks, coalition building, etc.
- Conducting program assessments on best practices in positive youth development.
- Providing strategic and group planning processes.
- Leading program and coalition evaluations.
- Advocacy for youth.
- Procuring resources in research based information in any and all of these areas.

3. **Connecting youth serving agencies and youth workers to provide a forum for shared resources and organizational strengths.**

In mobilizing and equipping families and individuals, Dr. Peter Benson (1997) identifies schools, religious communities, and neighborhood organizations as the first rung of support.

“Youth serving agencies offer an essential role in providing the opportunities and supports and the essential elements for positive youth development, helping youth gain the competencies and knowledge needed to meet the unmeasurable challenges they will face as they mature.” (Benson, 1997, p. 190).

In addition, youth service agencies and youth workers face increasing resource limitations and find the need to work more effectively and efficiently critical. Working together meets these needs.
Connecting youth serving agencies and youth workers is an essential spoke of the local youth development wheel. The local youth development educator is in a key role to provide multiple educational resources. These include:

- Training for youth workers on positive youth development and adolescent development.
- Educating on experiential learning and effective practices in working with youth.
- Cooperating and conducting program assessment and evaluation.
- Facilitating and providing group planning resources and skills. Examples include strategic planning, conflict resolution, networking skills, group goal setting and mission statement development.
- Training in volunteer recruitment and development.
- Advocating for youth.

4. **Strengthening the youth development principle in practice with local 4-H community clubs.**

Greg Hutchins, Assistant Dean and State Program Leader, Youth Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension states “The 4-H community club is Extension’s primary model for youth programming.” (Hutchins, 1998). The present vision and mission statements for UW-Extension’s 4-H Youth Development program articulate the focus of the education work. These statements are:

*Vision: 4-H Youth Development: A catalyst for positive community youth development.*
Mission: UW-Extension 4-H Youth Development integrates research, education, community-based partnerships, enabling youth to learn and practice skills to be productive citizens.

Hutchins presently asks 4-H youth development personnel to be “responsible for connecting the education and civic mission of 4-H with community youth interest.” (Hutchins, 1998).

In defining the uniqueness of UW-Extension 4-H community clubs, Jim Barthel states that the “educational methods, program structure, participant expectations, and purpose are distinct.” (Barthel, 1994, p. 1). In addition, Barthel sites the use of youth development concepts of 4-H community clubs as being used to address a wide variety of community and youth issues. Barthel highlights that placing “University faculty in counties (in the community) as an educational resource, motivator, planning and learning facilitator in support of youth development has been critical to keeping 4-H [community club and total] program focus on education.” (Barthel, 1994, p. 1).

Key participants in 4-H community club programming are youth members, youth volunteer leaders, adult volunteer leaders, parents, professionals and the community.

Youth development educational focus includes:

- Training in positive youth development.
- Educating and providing opportunities for life skill development including leadership.
- Providing organizational and group-planning skills.
- Training in volunteer recruitment and development.
Teaching and modeling train the trainer approaches.

Providing research-based resources and curriculum and models to ensure opportunities, elements and support for local youth and families are accessible.

5. Developing partnerships between community members and academic researchers to build the base of applicable youth development research.

Connecting academic research closer to practice in the community is a growing movement. (Zeldin, 1998). The knowledge gained is valuable to scholars, practitioners, policymakers, community members and leaders. Engaging stakeholders in research has benefits and barriers, but if the outcome is building effective strategies for integrating positive youth development and community development, the struggle is worth the effort. (Zeldin, 1998, Kellogg Foundation Report, 1999).

Local youth development educators have critical roles building conduits between scholars and practitioners. They are:

- Providing the opportunities and supports for participants to reach their goals successfully.
- Educating individuals in group-process and youth and community partnerships.
- Involving local citizens in determining the need for and design of local research projects.
- Conducting outcome based assessments and evaluation.
- Cooperating with researchers and conducting research.
6. **Modeling positive youth development principles through each educational endeavor creates a visible example for the community.**

“Virtually every major social movement in this nation has begun with individuals making a personal commitment to addressing a need or cause in their own lives, their community or their world.” (Benson, 1998, p. 157). Modeling actions and behaviors is not only critical for the development of youth, but for families and communities. Mentoring research validates the importance of role models in lives of youth. (Benson, 1998; McGill, 1997). Professionals have found that mentors and appropriate role models leads to successful transitions of new employees. (Rowley, 1999). In dissecting the learning components of apprenticeship, Collins and colleagues offer master models as the first step of successful apprenticeship programs. (Abbott, 1995).

As youth development educators, modeling positive youth development practices provides a base for others to follow. It is the catalyst for creating a multiplier effect of community youth development concepts. These educational roles focus on taking the lead in implementing the “Ten Commandments for Involving Young People in our Communities.” (Kretzman, 1994-95). These include:

- Start with the gifts, talents, knowledge and skills of young people.
- Acknowledge the unique individual, not the group to which they belong.
- Share the conviction that the community is filled with opportunities.
- Support real community building, not opportunities that are artificially created.
- Work to overcome the isolation of young people.
- Work to not aggregate young people by a deficit.
• Move to help groups beyond a youth representative but true representation of youth.
• Cultivate opportunities for youth to lead and teach.
• Reward and celebrate every effort.
• Amplify the message to young people: *We need you!* (Kretzman, 1994-95).

**Conclusion**

Youth development is a growing field of study and practice. From families, law enforcement, schools, judicial branches, human and family services, businesses, and policy makers to youth themselves, communities are seeking to be safe and healthy and productive places for their residents. Positive youth and family development objectives are identified to promote sustainability and growth in communities. University Extension youth development educators are strategically placed in communities to serve as the hub of the local youth development wheel. Local educational efforts need to focus on six spokes of emphasis to keep the wheel moving forward. This provides a holistic approach to positive youth development in each community.
Reference List


